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This is the **accepted version** of the article:

Tarabini-Castellani, Aina; Jacovkis, Judith. «The politics of educational transitions : evidence from Catalonia». European Educational Research Journal, Vol. 20, Núm. 2 (2020), p. 212-227. DOI 10.1177/1474904120976042

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Tarabini, A. and Jacovkis, J. (2020) The politics of educational transitions: evidence from Catalonia. *European Educational Research Journal*, (doi: 10.1177/1474904120976042).

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<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1474904120976042>

# **The politics of educational transitions: evidence from Catalonia<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract:**

Transitions to upper secondary education are of crucial importance to understanding educational inequalities. They are also vital to explaining the contemporary dynamics of Early School Leaving (ESL). Global hegemonic discourses around educational transitions and ESL shape student pathways in terms of rational and linear choices, assuming equal opportunities for lifelong learning. Simultaneously, the European Strategy attributes key roles to Vocational Education and Training (VET) and to guidance in order to smooth educational transitions, reduce ESL and meet the needs of the knowledge-based economy. The aim of the article is to problematise the linear relationship between ESL, VET and guidance policies representing the dominant contemporary rhetoric concerned with ensuring smooth transitions and opening long-term educational pathways for young people. The paper provides an in-depth analysis of the political construction of the transition from lower to upper secondary education in Catalonia, identifying how it is conceptualised, at a discursive level, by policy actors and also how it is implemented at the institutional level. The results aim to be regarded as useful analytical resource to inform critical policy analyses of educational transitions and their implications in terms of social inequalities.

*Keywords:* early school leaving, educational inequality, education system, vocational training, guidance

## **Introduction**

Transitions to upper secondary education are crucial to understand educational inequalities (Tarabini and Ingram, 2018). In most European countries this is the time when students are separated on academic or vocational paths. It is therefore the first time when young people face a ‘real choice’ in relation to their educational trajectory. International research indicates the transition points within the education system as key spaces of social selectivity in terms of class, gender and ethnicity (Blossfeld and Shavit, 2011). Research also suggests the relevance of the transition processes in explaining contemporary dynamics of Early School Leaving (ESL). Indeed, at EU level, the transition and completion of upper secondary

education is established as the minimum threshold for educational success (Alexiadou, Helgøy and Homme, 2019; Tarabini, 2019).

Within this framework, the European Council set the reduction of ESL as one of the Education and Training (ET2020) priorities, deeply permeating the national agendas, priorities and policies. Following the European agenda, smoothing transitions, strengthening Vocational Education and Training (VET) and improving guidance have appeared as key objectives in the education policy agendas of many Member States (European Commission et al., 2014). Moreover, these objectives have been legitimised in the name of the knowledge economy and the paradigm of lifelong learning (Dale and Parreira do Amaral, 2015). As indicated by the European Commission website, ‘vocational education and training is a key element of lifelong learning systems, which equip citizens with knowledge, skills and competences required in particular occupations and on the labour market’. Simultaneously, the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network states that:

Lifelong learning represents the principle that it is never too late: there is room for, and indeed a need for, recurrent education and training, for second chance education, for flexible learning paths, and thus for lifelong guidance (...) Guidance plays a pivotal role in creating smooth transitions, and a more inclusive learning environment (Oomen and Plang, 2014).

In this context, the aim of the article is to problematise the linear relationship between ESL, VET and guidance policies representing the dominant contemporary rhetoric concerned with ensuring smooth transitions and opening long-term educational pathways for young people. The paper provides an in-depth analysis of the political construction of the transition field from lower to upper secondary education in Catalonia, identifying how it is conceptualised by policy actors at a discursive level, and how it is implemented at the institutional level. The case under study is not only relevant as a specific, contextual example, but it presents a vital challenge to the European and global hegemonic discourses in this domain. Throughout the analysis of the transition field, our paper problematises the discourses of the policy makers concerning the role of VET in reducing ESL and ensuring successful transitions. It also questions the significance attributed to guidance as a central tool in developing pathways to lifelong learning. Overall, the paper interrogates the political conceptualisation of educational transitions and the ways in which the educational trajectories of young people are conceived and regulated within it.

The structure of the paper is as follows: in the next section, the regulation of educational pathways is discussed from a sociological analysis of education policy; the context of the study is then briefly introduced, before the methodology and the fieldwork undertaken are addressed; next, the results are analysed by examining the tensions and contradictions identified in the structure of the system, the educational planning and the guidance models; by way of conclusion, the last section offers final reflections on the analysis.

### **Theoretical approach**

The sociological analysis of education policy has been developed, especially since the 1990s, by authors such as Ball (1997), Dale (1999) and Whitty (1997). As indicated by these authors, the sociological analysis of education necessarily implies the incorporation of its political dimension. Indeed, an in-depth understanding of schools, classrooms, teachers or students requires examining how they overlap in specific social, economic, cultural and political contexts. In this respect, some of the key issues of a sociological analysis of education policy entail understanding what rationalities are concealed under different educational reforms; how these rationalities and their associated discourses are linked to aspirations, interests and needs of different social groups; or in what way social inequalities affect the design and implementation of these policies. Furthermore, for a sociological analysis of education policy and politics, it is essential to understand that the same policy may be part of the ‘problem’ that it is intended to study and not necessarily part of its ‘solution’.

This approach understands that education policies are not necessarily clear, coherent or fixed. On the contrary, they can be incomplete, incoherent, contradictory and unstable. It is therefore crucial to analyse education policy beyond its ‘objective’, ‘natural’ or ‘technical’ dimension, incorporating conflict and the struggle to ‘establish meanings’. Furthermore, a critical approach to education policy, from this viewpoint, questions its implicit arguments, the interests of the different actors involved, and its impacts on the population, at which it is aimed (Gale, 2001). As indicated by Dale (1999), it is necessary to look at the politics of education which allows for different education policies to be developed. In other words, it involves giving centrality to the agenda setting in education and to the structures through which it is created.

From our point of view, it is precisely the setting of the agenda for educational transitions and the definitions of the rules of the game within this field that enable different specific policies to be applied and different schools’ enactments to be realized (Ball, Maguire

and Braun, 2012). According to our perspective, the politics of educational transitions also help to explain the realisation of different power dynamics and social struggles surrounding these transitions, as well as related meanings and impacts in different countries and contexts.

On this basis, the analysis of transitions must be understood as a specific field of education policy, in the terms proposed by Rawolle and Lingard (2008). As such, it is based on power relations, enables or limits certain social positions, and articulates meanings and opportunities. This sociological perspective on the politics of educational transitions means that they can be understood beyond the dominant discourses of choice and individualization (Cuconato and Walther, 2015) and addressed within the framework of specific social spaces which generate, produce or reproduce inequalities. This perspective also allows for identification of the contradictions and omissions that are interwoven throughout the dominant discourse on lifelong learning, which is based on the myth that equality of educational access and opportunity exist to enable all citizens to learn and to improve their life chances (Ball, 2009). It also permits problematisation of the global hegemonic discourses that present VET and guidance as almost magical solutions for addressing ESL and ensuring smooth transitions throughout the education system. From a sociological perspective, an analysis of power relations is vital to understanding educational policy discourses and practices.

Our analysis draws on different studies developed in this field. First, well-established research in the area of educational transitions has provided critical insights capable of opening up the very meaning of concepts such as ‘choice’ and ‘aspiration’, which are mostly taken for granted in the politics and policies of educational transitions (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000; Reay, David and Ball, 2001). The neoliberal rhetoric of individualism, individualisation and choice has produced a highly homogeneous conception of youngsters (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997) as rational and instrumental choosers, able and equipped to effectively navigate their transitions through the education system to the labour market (Wyn, 2005).

Second, research on youth transitions from the perspective of the governance of education has demonstrated that, to different extents, the actors, institutions and activities of governance produce different ‘opportunity structures’ which frame the educational trajectories of young people (Parreira de Amaral, Walther and Litau, 2013). Through the terms of ‘transition regimes’ (Walther, 2006) and of ‘transition system’ (Raffe, 2008) different studies have explained how socioeconomic, institutional and cultural factors, at the national level, are articulated, generating different models through which young people’s

lives are regulated; and how the features of a country's institutional and structural arrangements shape young people's transitions from school to work. These studies demonstrate the contextualised nature of educational choices and transitions. Thus, they highlight the necessity of focusing on the factors impacting patterns of social inequality, in different contexts, rather than on the individual's capacity to cope with them.

Finally, the role attributed to VET in the process of smoothing transitions within the education system, as well as transitions to the labour market, makes it necessary to consider its specificities and the way it is implemented in particular contexts. Critical research in this area indicates that the division between academic and vocational training cannot be explained in technical or natural terms nor strictly based on the needs, abilities and innate interests of young people. On the contrary, this division is intrinsically related to parameters of social class and, therefore, is organised based on specific conflicts and interests (Bathmaker, 2005; Hickox and Moore, 1992; Young et al., 1997). In this respect, Nylund, Rosvall and Ledman (2017) have shown how the reform of upper secondary education carried out in Sweden starting from the 90s, and in particular the organisation of knowledge in the academic and vocational branches, is profoundly marked by power relations which structure society. Likewise, the case of apprenticeships in Canada analysed by Taylor (2010) reveals that both the policy and the practice of upper secondary education are subject to ambivalences, tensions and interests in conflict, which are fundamentally related to the nature of education as a positional good and, in particular, to the intensification of positional competition through credentials.

Our analysis provides new and complementary insights into previous research by uncovering the logics and assumptions of the politics of educational transitions and by interrogating their three main political dimensions: the structure of the system, the planning of the educational supply and the guidance models. These dimensions are of crucial importance when investigating the impacts of any transition field in terms of power relations, social inequalities and social struggles. In fact, while the empirical evidence provided by the analysis is specific to transitions within secondary schooling in the Catalan context, it represents a useful analytical resource to inform the policy analysis of educational transitions at different educational levels and in different contexts. The case under study, as indicated in the introduction, provides analytical keys for challenging the hegemonic rhetoric around educational transitions and ESL – particularly in relation to the importance of the role of VET and guidance.

Moreover, we propose a relational analysis (as proposed by Bourdieu) of the field of educational transitions at a double level. First, connecting the discursive and the institutional political levels allows for identification of the omissions, contradictions and tensions between the discourse of the policy actors and the effective institutional opportunity structures. And second, rather than focusing exclusively on the educational transitions to VET, our proposal presents a combined analysis of VET and Baccalaureate, understanding that both have an eminently relational nature. From this perspective the potential impacts of one path in relation to educational inequality must be understood and analysed in relation to the other. Indeed, from our perspective the tensions, conflicts and ambivalences generated in the field of upper secondary education are part of a struggle for meanings, opportunities and positions of the Baccalaureate in relation to VET and vice versa.

### **Transitions to upper secondary education in context**

As indicated in the introduction, the transitions to upper secondary education play a central role in the European Strategic Framework of ET2020, since obtaining an upper secondary education qualification is considered essential for any process of social and labour market inclusion. In this respect, the EU goal is to achieve less than 10% ESL by the year 2020 (15% for Catalonia).

Catalonia is one of the most challenging cases in the whole of the EU since ESL still affects 17% of young people (Spanish Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2018). Another element to understand the relevance of this transition in the Catalan context is the high polarisation of the training structure, which has the shape of an hourglass: a high population with low education levels, a small population on the intermediate education levels and a substantial part of the population with higher education. Population between 15 and 64 years old with upper secondary education represent a 23.9% in Catalonia while the average for the EU28 is 46.3% (CSASE, 2018).

One of the key elements to explain the low percentage of population with upper secondary education is the low prestige that VET has had historically. Although in recent years the prestige and supply of VET have increased significantly, it is still a training route with an insufficient supply and which provides schooling to a lower percentage of pupils than the Baccalaureate. For the academic year 2017-18, the total number of pupils enrolled in the Baccalaureate in Catalonia represented around 58% of the total, while for VET it went down to 42% (Catalan Ministry of Education, 2018).



The balance between the public and the private sector is also uneven. Across the region of Catalonia, over 65% of the upper secondary schools are publicly owned, irrespective of the training routes they offer. However, in some municipalities, the public sector appears to be struggling. For instance, in Barcelona, 39.5% of schools had a public supply of Baccalaureate and 31.5% of VET in the academic year 2017-18 (Catalan Ministry of Education, 2018). Moreover, highly unequal patterns, in terms of social origin, gender or ethnicity, are discernible in terms of the overall distribution of Baccalaureate and VET. Female pupils, those with a higher socio-economic and cultural status and Spanish nationals are more strongly represented in the academic track; contrastingly, there is an overrepresentation of boys, pupils of low socio-economic status and those of migrant origin in the vocational one. These inequalities are also reflected in the social characteristics of early school leavers at the European level (European Commission et al., 2014).

## **Methodology**

As indicated, the article's general objective is to analyse the political construction of the transition field from lower to upper secondary education in Catalonia, identifying how it is conceptualised by policy actors at a discursive level, and how it is implemented at the institutional level. This objective materialises in two specific goals: 1) to explore the discursive narratives shaping educational transitions by unveiling their undergirding assumptions; 2) to identify how educational transitions are problematised, in terms of Dale (2015), by policy makers, recognizing the ways they conceive, define and position the relevant 'problems' and the ways in which they present their constructed 'solutions'. By identifying the assumptions of policy makers, this analysis aims to highlight the contradictions, tensions and omissions in both their discourses and in the implementation of transitions in the institutional setting. This enables a problematisation of transitions as a political field that impacts the (re)production of social inequalities.

In order to perform the analysis a qualitative methodology has been developed based on 28 in-depth interviews with relevant policy actors in the Catalan upper secondary transition field<sup>2</sup>. The interviews were conducted between April and July 2017, and between January and September 2018. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, and all were transcribed verbatim. The analysis was undertaken using the Atlas-ti Programme, structuring the information in the three major dimensions of analysis (structure, supply and guidance) and combining the previously defined theoretical codes with those emerging from the empirical analysis.

## **Findings**

Below we present the analysis of the results, identifying the main defining elements, tensions, omissions, and contradictions which are outlined in each of the dimensions of analysis (structure of the system, planning of the educational supply and guidance model).

### ***The structure of upper secondary education***

The first result gathered from the analysis of the interviews is linked to the structure of upper secondary education and to the inequality of conditions based on which the academic and the vocational paths are deployed. Three major tensions are identified which characterise the structure of the system. The first tension refers to the degree of complexity to access the two types of upper secondary education. In this respect, different elements allow the transition to the Baccalaureate to be described as an ‘easy’ transition and the transition to VET as a ‘difficult’ one. On the one hand, most schools in Catalonia which offer Compulsory Secondary Education (ISCED 2, from 12 to 16 years old) also offer a Baccalaureate, but not VET. It is, thus, easier for pupils to select an option which is presented as more convenient thanks to their knowledge of both the space and most of the teachers and classmates. Contrary, more often than not, the transitions to VET involve a change of school (and often of territory) and, therefore, also of classmates and learning environments. In this context, most of interviewees consider that in the upper secondary stage the mobility of pupils should not be a problem. However, the starting conditions and the demands of mobility are not the same depending on the choice. Moreover, choosing VET requires a much greater knowledge of the particularities of the educational supply. In the field of VET, there are almost 70 vocational courses, while with the academic option there are only three alternatives. Furthermore, the bureaucracy of enrolment is much more complex than for the Baccalaureate. That means that numerous pupils, especially those from working class backgrounds, are lost in the process of choice, admissions, waiting lists, etc. This explains why, in practice, the choice of Baccalaureate is often a ‘non-choice’ and why, as numerous interviewees state, ‘The person who is really choosing is the one who chooses VET,’ (POL22<sup>3</sup>). As Walther et al. (2015) or Brunila et al. (2011) have also demonstrated, bureaucratic procedures and images of regular life pathways have a noticeable impact on the election of the ‘simplest’ and most ‘normalised’ educational trajectory. Consequently, the possibilities for smooth transitions and for lifelong learning are not as feasible for those pursuing the VET as for those studying the Baccalaureate.

The system does not make it easy to follow the vocational route. (...) It is the pupils studying VET, not the others, who have to go to another school, apply for admission, etc. This means that, at the age of 16, in the middle of adolescence, the system ends up discouraging young people from taking VET, because they have to leave their school, their friends, everything. (POL3)

The second tension at this level materialises in the criteria of access to both training routes. On the one hand, access to the Baccalaureate ‘only’ implies acquiring the certificate of Compulsory Secondary Education, while access to VET, especially those vocational courses with the greatest demand, depends on the availability of places and on the students’ grades during Compulsory Secondary Education. Thus, access to the Baccalaureate is guaranteed for everyone who wants to take it, while this is not ensured in VET. Paradoxically, although VET courses have, in general, low prestige, those which are scarcely offered are much more difficult to access than the Baccalaureate. This explains why there are strong hierarchies within upper secondary education, not only between Baccalaureate and VET but also between the different modalities of VET. While some vocational courses are cheap, public, and offered in a generalised manner throughout the territory, others have a very limited supply, are mainly private, highly concentrated in certain territorial spaces and, moreover, require high access grades. This affirms the existence of ‘elite’ forms of vocational education identified by Atkins’ (2017) and demonstrates the need to explore the under-explored VET provision in order to assess its potential impacts in terms of ESL.

Some vocational courses are almost elitist. Spectacular facilities, extremely high access grades, pupils with brilliant academic marks during Secondary Education and families who can pay for it. (POL1)

The third tension in this dimension refers to the admission and completion conditions of the two training routes and, in particular, to the dilemma of accessibility versus quality. On the one hand, a good part of the interviewees reveals the low training conditions in which a great deal of the VET pupils arrive (levels of knowledge, of self-esteem, of study and learning habits). They indicate that it is precisely the pupils repeating a school year, with a low level of acquisition of skills during Compulsory Secondary Education, or who have been put in lowest-ability groups, who are systematically directed toward VET. Moreover, as previous research has shown, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to attend VET than those in more advantaged positions (Bernardi and Requena, 2010).

On the other hand, it is important to bear in mind the possibilities of educational continuity offered by both paths in upper secondary education. On completing the Baccalaureate, students can access both university (after passing the university-access tests), or post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED 4) (direct access). On completing VET, however, students have to pass a test in order to access post-secondary non-tertiary education; additionally, Baccalaureate students are always given priority of access over VET students. This represents a clear inequality in the organisation of both training paths, and a clear disincentive to choose VET. The structure of the education system and of the characteristics and connections between its paths have been analysed in depth as key factors in understanding the unequal opportunities of students, which are especially harmful to those in more vulnerable situations (Müller and Karle, 1993).

VET students are constantly confronted with new decisions. After the vocational upper-secondary course, they again have to face another decision, to enter the labour market or to continue studying, and if they decide to continue studying they practically have to start the whole process again (...) We place young people on the edge of an abyss, an abyss of options, of schools, of procedures, but we do not give them anything to help navigate this ocean. (POL3)

The three tensions identified in the structure of the system question the image of equivalence between the academic and the vocational routes that arises from many policy discourses that, in turn, naturalise the inequalities in the admission and completion characteristics of the two training branches. The image of equivalence is mainly reinforced by a discourse of the educational trajectories which presupposes that the differences between paths are explained by the ‘needs’ and/or natural ‘capacities’ of the young people. The ‘opportunity structures’ (Parreira do Amaral, Walther and Litau, 2013) that frame the educational trajectories of young people, are mostly omitted from this picture. This connects with the aforementioned highly homogeneous conception of youth. Such rhetoric assumes that young people’s trajectories are planned, linear and mostly ‘ladder-like’ (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). On this basis, the inequality in paths and opportunities associated with the two routes ends up being explained as the result of different individual options, without any implication in terms of social inequality or positional struggle.

The Baccalaureate and VET are planned in a distinct way; their levels of competence are distinct; their levels of complexity are distinct. (...) Not everyone who finishes compulsory secondary education is ready to cope with the Baccalaureate. (POL12)

The limitations of the EU ET2020 strategy behind the notion of smooth transitions is clearly that it omits to acknowledge that not all the pupils enjoy equal opportunity to access each of the upper secondary pathways, no matter how smooth their transition. In this regard, it can be considered that the local policy makers share the same assumption as the ET2020 strategy, insofar as they neglect to problematise the impact of the structure of the whole upper secondary system in the explanation and solution of ESL.

### ***The planning of upper secondary educational supply***

This section analyses three major tensions identified in the dimension of planning the upper secondary education supply. Although it will also mention the Baccalaureate, it is important to indicate that, on raising broad issues about the state of upper secondary education, the interviewees mainly referred to VET. The analysis therefore focuses on aspects much more related to the planning of VET than to the Baccalaureate.

The first tension refers to the coordination of the interests and needs of the different players involved (young people, schools, companies, families, etc.). The needs of the labour market and the interests of the young people are, in particular, the two major poles which, as can be gathered from the analysis of the interviews, mainly put a strain on the definition of the criteria which must guide the planning of the upper secondary educational supply. The tension which is raised at this level refers to the difficulties to combine the satisfaction of both groups which may have very different interests and needs. Indeed, the discourses of the policy actors' interviewed show that it is not easy to balance the demands of young people and those of the labour market. As indicated by the interviewees, from the point of view of public planning, practical situations are confronted, such as the need to increase the interest in industrial professions in a context in which TV programmes such as *Master Chef* help to make culinary vocational studies as one of the most demanded by young people, despite the difficulties of entering the labour market. On the other hand, these difficulties do not exist for industrial professions and, however, the vocational studies associated with this profession are scarcely in demand by students. This kind of tension illustrates how power struggles, arising from the competing interests of various actors, determine the priorities of VET planning and reform. Although political discourses mostly frame the discussion in technical terms, the Marxist literature has widely demonstrated (Bowles and Gintis, 1976) that the interests of capital are crucial to understanding the relationship between the education system and the labour market.

It is necessary to respond to the labour market of the city, but, at the same time, it is necessary to get this labour market, and above all the educational supply, to connect with the interests of the young people. This is not an easy balance. (POL11)

The second tension identified in this dimension refers to the model of educational supply adopted to inform VET policies and reforms. There is a debate between a diversified model of supply, with relatively small centres distributed around the territory, and a model of big, prestigious, specialised hubs, like university campuses. On the one hand, several interviewees stated the need to diversify the supply in the territory. This diversification is intended to prevent the distance and the direct, indirect and opportunity costs associated with the choice from limiting the educational continuity opportunities of the socially most disadvantaged students. On the other hand, however, numerous voices call for a model which promotes big specialised centres which can concentrate all or a large part of the supply of certain vocational courses and, therefore, attract talent and business initiatives, and reduce costs. The first of the alternatives is closer to the current model, and could satisfy both the interests of the schools - reducing their potential resistance to transferring resources to other education centres -, and those of the students who see distance as an obstacle for their educational continuity. The second alternative could contribute to enhancing the prestige of VET, to strengthening specific vocational branches, and to multiplying the resources and synergies which arise from specialisation.

Concentration is a way of multiplying resources through specialisation, like that which is generated by a university campus. Here we have a very small, very dispersed VET supply, which is often explained because it is the most viable, the cheapest for the schools, but not necessarily the one that society most needs. (POL15)

In any case, and irrespective of the preferred model, the interviews indicate key issues for discussion, such as the viability of a single planning system for the whole territory, the differences between the needs and opportunities of the young people in accordance with their place of residence, the suitability of integrating the Baccalaureate and VET into a single educational planning strategy, or the need to improve the coordination of the centres with the productive and social fabric of each territory. One of the critical elements in this discussion, that is mostly absent in the political discourses, is the impact that different models could have: this depends largely on the social background of the students, specifically the material

and symbolic impact of their environment in shaping their educational transitions and choices (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018).

The third tension in this sphere refers to the need to recognise, deal with and manage the interests, pressures and resistances of the schools and of the teaching staff. As already indicated, the distribution of the supply reveals sharp contrasts in accordance with the types of VET and within the territory. Furthermore, these contrasts are not directly or exclusively explained by the particularities of the employment fabric of the territory. On the contrary, aspects such as the facilities of different schools, the capacity of certain management teams to apply more or less pressure, or the prices associated with the deployment of the distinct vocational courses explain, to a large extent, the development of one type of supply or another. The interviewees indicate that the schools seek at least to maintain the supply they have, because this guarantees their continuity and that of their workforces. Thus, the initiatives for the restructuring of the supply formulated by the Education Authorities are not always well received by the schools and the teaching staff. Again, the tension which is defined in relation to conflicting interests raises a challenge for public policy, which involves the establishment of clear priorities known by all the actors involved. As one of the interviewees indicated, ‘we need to create a narrative of change, of the need for this change, and of its urgency’ (POL3). What this tension shows is that schools are embedded in a context that they also contribute to producing through their enactment of – and opposition to – different policies and initiatives (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012). Thus, they are not neutral, but political, actors in defining the field of transitions

The omission of the segmentation of the structure in the establishment of the planning criteria cuts across the three elements that have been indicated in this section and, indeed, frames the discussion on the objectives of VET and, in contrast, of the academic path. The extensive literature on vocationalism has addressed the debates on the purposes of VET and the difficulties in reconciling the objectives of social integration and excellence in their different modes of provision (Atkins, 2017; Hickox, 1995; Nylund, Rosvall and Ledman, 2017). In this regard, various authors have analysed the impact of different criteria for planning the educational supply in terms of educational opportunities for young people (Barbieris, 2013; Pilz, 2017). Moreover, previous literature has also signalled the crucial need to take into consideration the social composition of vocational and academic paths in order to properly understand and assess their expected functions in different contexts (Grubb, 1985).

Following this line of inquiry, our analysis reveals a dominant discourse on educational planning which mostly addresses the VET sector and naturalises and takes for

granted the functions and characteristics of the Baccalaureate. Overall, the analysis reflects a highly stratified discourse on the planning of the upper secondary educational supply which treats each track as an independent and isolated stance, while simultaneously technifies the debate about the social functions of VET and their implications in terms of inequalities. Against this approach, our analysis shows that the views on the functions of both the educational routes have to be articulated. Moreover, our results suggest the political component of upper secondary provision by highlighting the conflicting elements and identifying three distinct tensions. While the European Strategy tend to present the debate on planification as a technical discussion that can be solved for the benefit of all the actors, our evidence is supported by previous research that demonstrates that not all educational delivery allows to occupy a good position in the knowledge-based economy (Dale and Parreira de Amaral, 2015) and that, in fact, each track is designed to satisfy different and unequal labour market requirements (Atkins, 2017; Grubb, 1985).

### ***Guidance on educational trajectories for young people***

The last set of tensions analysed comes within the sphere of guidance. Indeed, all the interviewees indicate that guidance is a central challenge to improve the educational transitions of young people. Three main spheres of tension are again underlined.

The first set of tensions is linked to the determinants of the agents responsible for guidance, in particular of the teachers. Numerous investigations highlight the impact of guidance devices and policies on the processes of choice and educational transitions (Müller, 2014; Sultana, 2014). These studies explore the mechanisms for the reproduction of social inequalities that, with more or less intent, can activate certain guidance strategies<sup>4</sup>.

As indicated by previous research and as pointed out by our own analysis, guidance is not just a technique applied in a neutral manner, but instead it has a series of institutional and cultural determinants which are necessary to consider. Regarding the institutional factors, several interviewees mention the educational supply of the schools as the main determinant in the guidance that is given to the students. This connects with the tensions arising from the structure of the system and from the provision of the supply, which were tackled above. In relation to the cultural factors, the analysis reveals the centrality that the interviewees attribute to teaching beliefs in the guidance processes. These beliefs are not only about the capacities and abilities of the young people, but also, and above all, about the characteristics and particularities of the two upper secondary education routes. According to most of interviewees, guidance is given based on an unequal structure of prestige. As mentioned,



those repeating a school year, with low learning results or enrolled in lowest-ability groups during Compulsory Secondary Education, are systematically directed toward VET. In this respect, certain authorities involved in the planning and design of education policy demand a reflection on the teaching beliefs able to reduce the impact of the institutional and cultural determinants, which inevitably affect guidance practices, discourses and logics.

There is still a deeply rooted idea among teachers that the pupils who do very well in Compulsory Secondary School should do the Baccalaureate and those who are borderline should do VET. We divert the academically weak pupils toward VET and then they fail because they cannot maintain the subjects that are offered. (POL8)

The second point of tension in relation to guidance refers to the criteria according to which it is given and to their unequal effects depending on the social and gender profiles of the students. Among all the people interviewed, there is agreement that the guidance practices must be capable of coordinating the capacities and abilities of young people with their interests and tastes. However, there is no mechanical relationship between interests and capacities, between ‘what you like’ and ‘what you are good at academically’. It is also necessary to consider what occurs with those young people who are considered ‘bad academically in all spheres. What happens with – and how do you guide - those who do not know how to express what they like or what ‘they are good’ at because they have never experienced the sensation of ‘feeling good’ within the school environment? Although in an unconscious and subtle manner, this type of question determines the role played by the criteria of capacity and taste in the guidance practices and their unequal impacts according to the social profile of the students. It is well known that academic results are not distributed at random among pupils. Likewise, the tastes and interests are mediated by the social identities and, therefore, specific groups of young people will find it difficult to express their interest in certain areas of knowledge, precisely because they do not fit in with their social identity. The dilemmas between capacities and tastes are, thus, more complex than they seem at first sight. However, as it is more ‘tangible’, ‘visible’ and ‘objective’, ‘capacity’ ends up directing the guidance logic in a priority fashion.

In practice, what we do is to try to convince them of the choice in view of their capacity. Maybe we do this to protect the young people, so that they do not fail. We do it for them, but we do give more weight to capacities than to the real interests of the young people. (POL8)

The third tension refers to the options young people have to follow different educational trajectories within the actual provision of the educational supply, to the available resources of their families, and to the possibilities arising from their educational trajectories during compulsory secondary schooling (mostly their grades). All these elements, in fact, act as –mainly implicit- criteria of guidance. According to different interviewees, whether the student has the material resources to pursue his/her desired educational pathway can be a stronger criterion in determining the guidance offered than his/her academic abilities. Thus, the guidance-transition nexus is mediated by determinants of the system and of the educational supply, which have been addressed in the previous sections. It is also mediated by the material possibilities of each student to pursue different educational paths. However good the guidance is, possibility will always end up prevailing over taste and capacity for the most disadvantaged pupils if the upper routes are not brought into line in terms of quality and equity. And this will continue working as a mechanism of reproduction of social inequality.

Those people who have more financial and social difficulty are always at a disadvantage (...) and this greatly affects guidance. If you have a pupil with high capacity, or with great interest in an area, but you see that they will not be able to access this modality, either because there are no places, because it is very far, because the price is high, you end up redirecting them (...) we do not apply the same criterion for everyone. (POL8)

As this section shows, guidance is at the forefront of a large part of the discourse on educational transitions to upper secondary education. In a manner coordinated with the previous sections, the importance of guidance as the main political solution to transitions blurs the weight of the factors of the structure of the education system and of the planning of the educational supply in the set-up of socially unequal educational transitions. Furthermore, the effect of the determinants of the guidance and the predominance of certain guidance criteria for a certain kind of a pupil may mean, precisely, that guidance practices contribute to accentuating the bias in transitions to upper education.

The emphasis on guidance plays an important role in reducing ESL. It is assumed that well-guided students will be able to choose the most 'suitable' pathway for them and consequently to successfully complete their upper secondary education. However, guidance activities are, in practice, mostly focused toward funnelling 'problematic' and 'poor performing' students toward VET than toward build meaningful educational trajectories for

all students. Paradoxically, in this sense, although local discourses – in alignment with the ET2020 strategy - highlight the relevance of strengthening VET as a means of reducing ESL, they hardly ever acknowledge that guidance practices continue to direct the ‘worst’ students toward this vocational track. This uncritical acceptance of the relationship between ESL and VET contributes to reinforcing and reproducing social inequalities by ensuring students of lower socio-economic status occupy VET courses that are designed to prepare them to occupy working class positions in the labour market.

## **Conclusions**

Transitions to upper secondary education are a key element to explain the degree of equity and excellence of an education system (Blossfeld and Shavit, 2011). In the Catalan context the high level of ESL at this time of educational transition, the low percentage of population with intermediate qualification levels, and the social inequalities expressed in the type, form and implementation of educational transitions reveal that this is one of the key challenges for education policy.

This article has adopted the sociology of education policy as a framework to analyse the politics of educational transitions and its potential realisations and impacts in the provision of different opportunities for young people. As we have argued, it is crucial to look at the political structures through which different education politics, policies and practices are developed. It is the setting of the agenda of educational transitions and the definition of the rules of the game within this field (Dale, 1999; Rawolle and Lingard, 2008) that allow for different possibilities to be realised.

Educational choices and transitions are neither conceived nor made in a vacuum but within a complex set of material, institutional, relational and symbolic contexts which frame young people’ options and minds. Choosing a path, school or area of knowledge is not only the result of different individual options; rather, it is intrinsically associated with positional struggles among social groups to maintain or reproduce their social positions within and throughout the education system (Parreira de Amaral, Walther and Litau, 2013).

Specifically, our article has helped to uncover the three main political dimensions explaining the logics and assumptions of the politics of educational transitions in Catalonia: the structure of the system, the planning of the educational supply and the guidance models. The principal conclusions of the analysis for each of the dimensions under study are the following:

At the level of the structure of the system, three main tensions have been detected: the ‘difficulty’ or ‘ease’ of different transitions, the criteria for access to different paths, and the possibilities to continue studying which arise from them. These tensions originate from the articulation of a system of upper secondary education organised under very different conditions for the provision of both tracks. In this respect, our analysis demonstrates that the dominant discourse of equivalence between the two tracks naturalises the positional competition that exist between them and - in turn - omits the possibility for very different ‘opportunity structures’ to open up to pupils (Parreira de Amaral, Walther and Litau 2013). Both European and national rhetoric around educational transitions assume that educational choices are mainly explained by young people’s varying capacities, needs and skills, overlooking the existence of profound hierarchical and power-based differentials between and within tracks. They also omit to consider that these hierarchies, produced and perpetuated by the structure of an educational system, are deeply unequal.

At the level of the planning of the upper secondary educational supply, the analysis also indicates three tensions, which affect the development of successful transitions: the interests of different actors to influence the development of educational provision, the model for supply, and the role of schools in resisting specific proposals. These tensions arise from a technical and neutral conception of educational planning that neglects to pay attention to its intrinsic political nature (Young et al., 1997). Again, European and national discourses largely omit to acknowledge that the interests of different actors are deeply embedded in power struggles. These, in turn, are related to the purposes attributed to VET in reinforcing the social division of labour (Atkins, 2017). Additionally, the debates around the model for educational provision are exclusively related to VET, failing to acknowledge its relational nature in comparison to the Baccalaureate and – consequently - excluding the need to develop a new model that reconsiders the entire system of upper secondary education. These debates also omit to consider the unequal effects of implementing different models on the students’ opportunities in accordance with their socio-economic background and – specifically – to address the relevance of the urban space in shaping the educational choices of young people from different socioeconomic origins (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). Moreover, this technical conception of educational planning obscures the political nature of schools and their agents (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012), ignoring that educational reform does not only respond to educational goals but also to the dynamics of institutional reproduction.

Guidance is the last dimension addressed in the analysis. As we have argued, guidance strategies are considered, both at global and national levels, as one of the main

political responses to the ‘problem’ of educational transitions and ESL. We have proved, however, that guidance discourses and practices are characterised by tensions, omissions and contradictions that are charged with social and political significance (Lappalainen, Mietola and Lahelma, 2012). First, institutional and cultural determinants have been indicated as biasing the practices of educational agents, which are also affected by the specific educational supply of each school and by teachers’ beliefs and expectations about their students. And second, the analysis has shown the implications of the guidance criteria in terms of social inequalities and proves how these criteria are clearly mediated by the social class of the students, in terms of their meaning and articulation. Overall, our analysis demonstrates that guidance strategies cannot be interpreted or created without considering the structure of the system and the features of the supply. The socio-economic hierarchies, struggles and power dynamics, embedded in policy making are also translated into the guidance strategies and models that can be analysed as a part of the political construction of educational transitions.

Overall, the analysis contributes to problematise the European hegemonic discourses that present VET and guidance as almost magical solutions for addressing ESL and ensuring smooth transitions throughout the education system. As our analysis demonstrates the political construction of the transition field is deeply embedded in power relations that are expressed both at discursive and institutional levels and that critically impacts in the reproduction of social inequalities.

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<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness under the R+D National Research Program, Grant number CSO2016-80004P. Project title: 'The construction of post-16 educational opportunities: an analysis of post-compulsory educational transitions in urban settings' (PI: Aina Tarabini).



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<sup>2</sup> The interviews have been conducted within a large 4-year Project on post-16 educational transitions in Spain (details removed for peer review). Besides the interviews with policy makers and stakeholders, the fieldwork includes case studies in eight secondary schools in Barcelona, containing 35 interviews with school principals and coordination staff, 37 interviews with teachers, 1.319 questionnaires with students and 68 interviews with students.

<sup>3</sup> To ensure the interviewees anonymity, their names and institutional positions have been replaced by a numerical code.

<sup>4</sup> See Lappalainen, Mietola and Lahelma (2012) for the impact of guidance practices on the construction of gender subjectivities and on the persistence of gendered educational trajectories in Finland. See Bonizzoni, Romito and Cavallo (2016) for the role of these practices on the overrepresentation of immigrant students on the vocational path in Italy.